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November 2003

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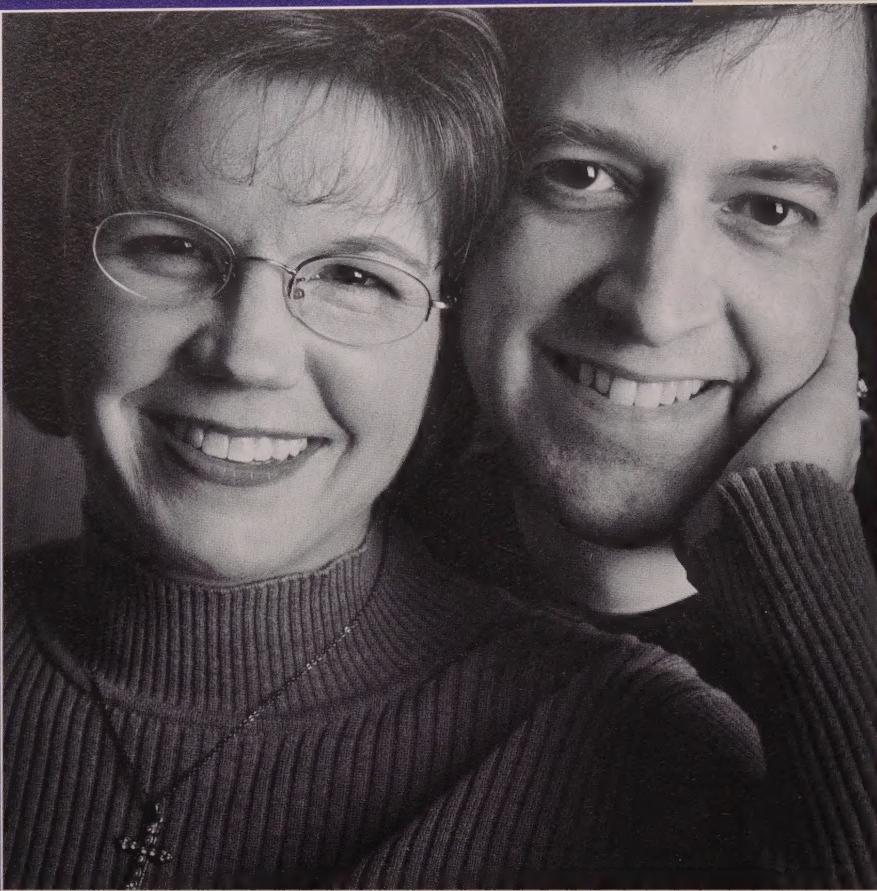


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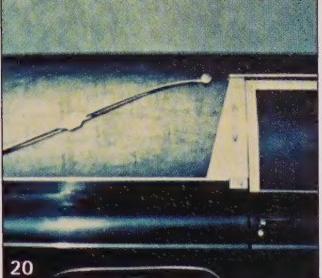
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Editor Nancy Goldberger
 Managing Editor Barbara Hofmaier
 Contributing Editor Deb Bogaert

Copy Editor Audrey Novak Riley
 Editorial Assistant Beth McBride

Art Direction On Track Visual Communications
 Cover Derek P. Redfearn

DEPARTMENTS

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

As I recently thumbed through a magazine, I noticed an ad for a car company. The photo showed an ominous-looking sky and a road winding through mountainous terrain. The words above the photo read: "The longest road is the one to redemption." I know the auto manufacturer was referring to something else, but for me, this sentence took on a different meaning.

I thought about how remarkably easy my road to redemption has been. For as long as I can remember, I have known that I am an imperfect being. I have known that because I am human, I was born into sin. I have also known that no matter what I may do, I am powerless to redeem myself from this flawed state.

If my knowledge stopped there, I would be in trouble. But I have also known Jesus my whole life. I know the love, comfort, and forgiveness that come to me as a redeemed child of God. The work has been done on my behalf. All I had to do was accept this gift, so freely given.

I have also been aware of the tremendous responsibility that comes with this gift. Being redeemed does not mean that we don't have other work to do. As humans we face many challenges—some very personal, others more public. As believers, though, we know we do not face these challenges alone.

When we seek greater understanding of our own lives and of each other, starting from the vantage point of already being redeemed makes the task manageable. We can find joy in the challenge and in one another.

When we seek to understand our own inner workings, conquer our own fears, or quiet the voice of doubt when it creeps in, we can stand fast, knowing that the road to redemption has already been traveled. We do none of these things by ourselves. God is always at our side, leading, guiding, comforting. We are encouraged to call upon God in joy and sorrow, in celebration and in need. God also tells us to support one another. What a gift to know that even at our lowest moments, God's hand is always on our shoulder.

Peace and blessings to each of you.

Nancy Goldberger, editor

Correction

Please note the following correction to the article "For the Healing of the World" in the July/August 2003 issue:

A total of 380 delegates attended the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Winnipeg, Canada, in July. Of that number, 182 were women and 198 were men. Included in the total are the 68 youth delegates.

We apologize for the error.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Storing Up Treasures

by Marj Leegard

MANY OF US HAVE CLOSE TIES TO THE SQUIRREL MENTALITY. WE WORK DILIGENTLY TO FILL JARS WITH STRAWBERRY PRESERVES. The berries go all the way to the bottom of the jar because that is all there is: berries and a little sugar and lemon and a lot of cooking and stirring. We sigh over sweet, green chunky pickles and garlicky dills. The freezer holds corn as sweet as the August day it was picked. The treasure of summer for the winter that is coming.

In Matthew 6:21 we read, "Your heart will always be where your treasure is" (Contemporary English Version). We don't deny our heart's involvement, our enthusiasm for our gardens and our jars. We can scarcely hide it. Our friends know that if they visit us, they will carry home at least a squash. The garden bounty is in the garage and in the basement and on the steps.

God has treasure for us. When we hold open the empty palm of our hand and hear "The body of Christ" and receive the bread, the whole treasure of now and eternity is ours. It is treasure we can see and hear and taste and feel. The treasure of the church through the centuries faithfully holding forth the gospel, sending out messengers, preparing pastors, calling teachers. Building and embellishing and repairing, eliminating barriers, making things increase. And yes, discussing and even arguing.

The church in all its manifestations is a treasure held by God and graciously shared with us. We can touch the church when we pass the peace or when we use a dust cloth to polish the pews. The treasure

that is the church shines in our very being like the ruby-red preserves on the pantry shelf.

Jesus cautions us about our treasures. We are to store up treasures in heaven. I like that. I want to get my busy self even busier. I have good deeds that I want to file away in a heavenly cabinet. And then I remember the words of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Irony of American History*: "No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint." And I know I have no little jars of good deeds to store on heaven's shelves.

Jesus gives us treasure to examine and cherish. The treasure is ours to disperse as far as our voices and gifts can carry it. Quilts carry stitches and concern for those who will welcome the warmth and protection. Cookies carry hugs to college kids who are just a little lonely for a moment. Warm, clean, comfortable churches filled with smiling, welcoming people are a treasure and a vital part of worship.

Have you dreamed of the day a van will come to your door with a bouquet of roses and more money than you can imagine? Open the door! A treasure is here that cannot be measured, a treasure that no one except a loving God can give—eternal life. Touch it. Look at it. Share it. Store it. Your heart will be where your treasure is.

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

FOR ALL THE SAINTS



I WAS NURSING A SECOND CUP OF COFFEE EARLY ONE THURSDAY MORNING WHEN THE PHONE RANG. EMMA'S TEAR-CHOKED VOICE ON THE OTHER END OF THE LINE CONFIRMED THAT THIS WAS A BAD-NEWS CALL. "PASTOR, THEY JUST CALLED FROM THE NURSING HOME," SHE TOLD ME. "MOM DIED EARLY THIS MORNING."

T

he news was not unexpected. Over the past few months, Ruth's health had deteriorated steadily. Each time I visited her, she seemed more frail. About a week before, I had noticed that the hands holding the small silver communion chalice were as thin and fleshless as a bird's claws. She spoke of the past, of the days when she, her husband, Harold, and an adolescent Emma had knelt side by side at the altar rail to eat the bread and drink the wine together.

"We wore hats, then, Emma and I. That's what women wore," Ruth told me that day in a voice that, like a once plush and richly hued Oriental carpet, had become thin and worn with age and use. "The pastor put the bread in our mouths. And we used the common cup—not those nasty little glasses that we use now." A ghost of a smile crossed her face, and she sighed. "I love Holy Communion, Pastor."

"I can tell it means a lot to you," I agreed.

"Yes. When I take Communion, I feel as though I'm closer to Jesus. Closer to Harold, too. He's been gone 12 years now. Will I see him again when I die?"

"Yes, Ruth, I truly believe you will see him again."

"Good." She smiled and then yawned. "I'm so tired."

"I'll leave now so you can rest, dear," I told her. We held hands and prayed. "I'll see you again," I said.

"Yes." She sank back on her pillows. "I'll see you again."

When I visited next, Ruth was in a coma. It was

clear that the sands of her earthly life were rapidly slipping away. As I stood by her bedside and prayed the Order for the Commendation of the Dying, I was aware that I was standing on holy ground, the place where mortality and eternity meet. Ruth was poised between this world and the next. She was ready to go; as a baptized child of God, she had been preparing for this journey her entire life. The only thing we could do for her now was commend her to God's loving care.

Early the next morning, the phone call came.

WE CELEBRATE THE LIFE OF FAITH

I met Emma and her husband, Jack, late Thursday afternoon to plan Ruth's funeral service. Once the date and time were set, we discussed where the funeral would take place. In many parts of the country it is customary to hold a funeral or memorial service at the funeral home or the graveside. But when an active member of my congregation dies, I invite the family to consider having the Order for the Burial of the Dead as part of a full worship service in church. The community that gathers to mourn is comforted by familiar surroundings. As a reminder of the white garment

WHEN I TAKE COMMUNION, I FEEL AS THOUGH I'M CLOSER TO JESUS. CLOSER TO HAROLD, TOO. HE'S BEEN GONE 12 YEARS NOW.

by Deborah McConomy-Wallace

worn by the believer at baptism, we drape the coffin with a white pall at the beginning of the service and remove it at the conclusion of the service. We sing familiar hymns and celebrate Holy Communion.

The funeral service becomes a true celebration of the life of faith and the hope of resurrection when it is placed within the context of the worshiping community in which the departed believer heard God's Word, received the sacrament, and was nurtured in faith. At the Lord's Table, the church on earth and the church in heaven come together to celebrate Christ's sacrificial love, which made it possible for this loved one to receive God's gift of eternal grace.

Because they knew how important Ruth's faith was to her and how much it means to them to be a part of

UNITED WITH ALL BELIEVERS

The day after the funeral, a parishioner dropped in to tell me how much she had appreciated the service. "It's the first time I ever had Communion during a funeral service here at church," Sarah said. "That was different!"

I've been a parish pastor long enough to know that her last sentence was Lutheran-speak for "We've never done it that way before. I don't know why we're doing it that way now. I'm not sure I like it, and can you tell me why I should?"

"Wasn't that wonderful?" I said. "I asked Emma and Jack if they'd like to have Communion during the service, and they thought it was a great idea. Having funeral services at church rather than at a funeral home gives us more worship options, including Communion. I could tell by people's expressions that sharing the Lord's Supper during the funeral meant a lot to them."

"But why have Holy Communion at a funeral? It's not as though the person who died can participate." Sarah smiled at her own joke.

I grinned back at her. "Well, actually, yes, in a way they do participate."

She looked puzzled. "How is that possible? We don't give last rites, do we?"

"Well, no," I said, and went on to explain that according to the Lutheran understanding, for the sacrament of Holy Communion to be effective, the person receiving it must receive it in faith, believing that he or she is receiving the bread and wine, Christ's body and blood.² Giving the sacrament to someone who is comatose or deceased would mean nothing to the person. Instead, we pray the Order for the Commendation of the Dying.

"Ruth was with us at the Lord's Table yesterday," I said, "because whenever we receive Communion, we

HAVING FUNERAL SERVICES AT CHURCH RATHER THAN AT A FUNERAL HOME GIVES US MORE WORSHIP OPTIONS, INCLUDING COMMUNION.

a community of believers, Emma and Jack agreed to hold Ruth's funeral service at the church.

The service was glorious. The church was crowded, and the rafters rang as we sang "For All the Saints." As people came forward to receive Holy Communion, they passed Ruth's coffin. Many reached out and touched the white pall lovingly. In some indefinable way, it seemed that we were getting a glimpse of the heavenly banquet where Ruth was now welcomed as an honored guest for all eternity.

At the cemetery, surrounded by the scents and sounds of sunlit summer, we stood by the grave as a soft breeze carried away the final notes of "Amazing Grace." Then with the words, "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our sister, Ruth," we began the process of committing Ruth's earthly remains to their final resting place under the trees.¹

anticipate the heavenly feast that has no end. It's more than just private time between Jesus and the individual believer. We are united with believers of every time and place, what the writer of Hebrews refers to as 'so great a cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12:1). In one of the Eucharistic prayers, we pray that God will 'join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes as victorious Lord of all.'³

"Outside of space and time, we gather at the table with the crucified and risen Lord as well as with the disciples who were with Jesus the night he was betrayed, whom he told to eat the bread and drink the wine in order to remember him.

"We're at the table with people who were martyred because they dared to believe in the crucified and risen Lord. We feast with the saints whose lives are examples of faith-filled service. We share the table with countless people who have lived faithful lives in the crucified and risen Lord. Best of all, we come together at the table with the people whom we know and love who have gone before us in the faith. People like Ruth. Like your husband David."

We sat silently for a moment, each lost in thought. I was remembering my two grandfathers who died years ago. John, my father's father, was a patient and kind man who read stories to us. Harry, my mother's father, taught us to see the glory of God in birds, horseshoe crabs, and grains of sand. I pictured both of them in the somber suits they wore to church every week, and smiled at the thought of them kneeling, one on either side of me, at the altar rail.

I looked at Sarah, who was very still. After a moment, she spoke, her voice subdued. "My son, James, was in the Army during Vietnam. He was against the war but felt it was his duty to serve, so he enlisted. David and I were so proud of him.

"James was over there only seven months. There was a raid. He went back for a couple of his buddies who had been hit, brought them out, and went back for a third. That's when he got hit. Killed in action.

"We had a military funeral. They gave me the flag and told me what an honor it was that my son died for his country. It was an honor. But all I can think of is my boy when he was little." She swallowed. "It's been years, Pastor, and I keep telling myself I should be over the grief. But I'm not. He was my only child.

"He used to love to come to Communion. And that's when I miss him most—at Communion." She looked at me. "But you're telling me he's there, too? Like Ruth?"

"Yes, Sarah. Like Ruth, James was a baptized child of God. When you take Communion, James is at the Lord's Table with you." She was silent for a long moment. Then she looked at me with a radiant smile on her face, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "I can't believe it. I missed him, and I didn't realize that he's still there with me."

We both stood. "Thank you, Pastor. I wish we had Communion every Sunday. I think I might like to have Communion at my own funeral, too."

As Sarah left, she was humming a tune. It sounded like "For All the Saints."

Deborah McConomy-Wallace is pastor of St. Peter Lutheran Church, North Wales, Pa., and an adjunct professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

NOTES

1. Order for the Burial of the Dead, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 213.
2. See Philip Melanchthon, "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), Article XIII, 221:20, 220:6; see also Article IV, 130:62–63.
3. Holy Communion, Setting 3, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 112.



Seeking Wholeness

by Anne Basye

WHEN ILLNESS STRIKES, WE WANT FAMILY AND FRIENDS TO SURROUND AND CODDLER US. BUT FOR FAMILIES SPLIT BY ALIENATION OR DIVORCE, THAT KIND OF COMFORT CAN BE TOUGH TO FIND.

For four years, my former mother-in-law has endured unending chemotherapy and radiation in order to fight off cancer and keep her place in the world. Her bones have broken, and her lungs have filled with fluid. Her cheerful, optimistic spirit has crumbled under the weight of constant pain. And although her husband and daughters have attended her with patience and kindness, one empty spot just can't be filled: the one left by her absent son. Not even cancer has persuaded him to visit the family he has shunned for seven years.

Why, oh why, she laments, isn't her family whole?

I know all the words to that song.

As I write this, my son is suffering with a nasty staphylococcus infection in his lower leg. In tropical climates or places without antibiotics, such an infection can lead to amputation. In Chicago, we're hoping for a better outcome.

LIFE CAN SEPARATE US FROM PEOPLE WE LOVE.

Working with my former husband—the one who won't see his mother—is tough. As divorced parents, we've generally been able to manage Alex's milestones and mishaps without coming closer than arm's length from one another. This time we've been thrown together for medical decisions, hospitalizations, tests, procedures, and constant vigilance.

It is not a comfortable alliance. The awkwardness never goes away, and Alex feels it most of all.

The awkwardness also awakens a familiar longing in me: a longing for wholeness that goes beyond Alex's bodily healing. Of course I want his leg to heal and his busy, active life to resume. But I also wish that our life as a family weren't so fragmented. Like my mother-in-law, I cry: Why can't my family be whole?

Coping with our brokenness is a necessary part of life. Now and then it's even a matter of pride. In spite of divorce, we've kept our commitment to our son, and our two-household family is peaceful and secure. But in anxious times, when I feel especially broken, it's tempting to imagine that other, more "normal" families are handling life better than we are!

Intellectually, I know that "normal" is an illusion. None of us feels quite normal. Most of us imagine that other people's lives are shinier than our own. Not long ago, a new friend in a difficult life situation praised me for "having it all together." Sharing a few details cleared up that mistaken impression, but I felt

terrible about accidentally making her feel the weight of her own un-normalness.

The "not normal" pebble in my shoe pinches most when I run into the Bible's sterner texts about marriage and divorce. In some corners of the church, these verses have been misused to create a template for "normal" that excludes and shames

many. To the ones who feel "not normal," the church can seem like a place that withholds God's promise of reconciliation and wholeness.

All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Those of us whose lives, by choice or by circumstance, appear to go against the standards of behavior God sets forth—standards that none of us mere humans can perfectly meet—can feel this more keenly. We can also find it harder to count ourselves among the forgiven. Even my former mother-in-law, a woman with a nearly blameless life as far as I can tell, imagines, on her bad days, that her four-year ordeal with cancer is a consequence sent from God.

Fortunately for all of us, not only did Jesus specialize in people who weren't normal, he labored to release them from the rigid "normal" rules of his day. People rejected by society at large he embraced and liberated. He stepped over the laws of the Sabbath in order to heal, forgive, and restore to wholeness whenever he encountered the "not normal" in pain. These loving and compassionate actions set Jesus himself outside the boundaries of "normal."

His work is the same today. If Jesus stopped by

Alex's hospital room, I'm sure he wouldn't even notice our family arrangement. He would throw his arms around us in prayer, just as he would embrace and comfort families led by grandparents, aunts, foster parents, single parents, same-sex couples, or anyone who commits to loving another person.

Yes, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God—but all, even the least "normal," are welcome at God's table. And at God's table is the promise of wholeness at last.

Life can separate us from people we love. It can push us into territory that feels frighteningly outside our cultural norms. But no matter where life takes us, we can remember Paul's words in Romans 8: "Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death?"

The wonderful answer is that no, it can't. "Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!" It doesn't matter whether you're normal or not.

Anne Basye, a member of Unity Lutheran Church in Chicago, is mother of Alex, now 16.

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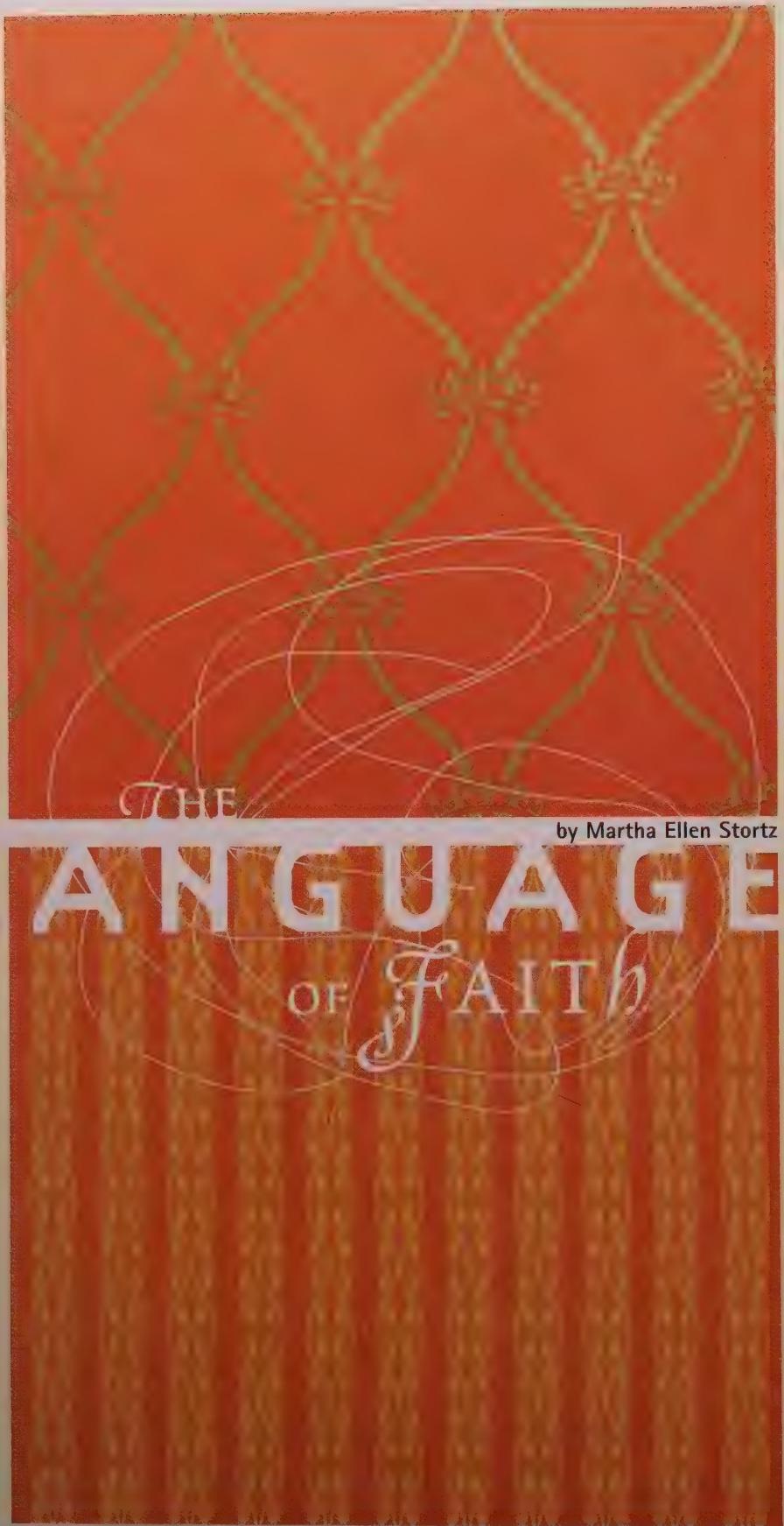
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Christians are talking a lot about sex lately! A topic that used to be forbidden in polite company now comes up regularly in pulpits, Sunday school classrooms, and adult Bible studies. For all of our reputed bashfulness, Lutherans are joining right in, as synods and congregations prepare to discuss findings from the ELCA's Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. The conversations are spirited, often heated, and occasionally angry. People wonder aloud if all this talk about sexuality will be church-dividing. I maintain that if we remember to speak from that first language of faith, Christian talk about sex can be church-uniting.

My fear is that when Christians talk about sex, they resort to categories that do not express the nuances and depth of their convictions. We talk about sexual identity as if it were the center of gravity for who people are. Our thinking about norms in sexual orientation is colored by our own sexual orientation. We discuss sexual behavior with a list of "thou shalt nots," as if there were nothing positive to say. We think of sexual practice as if clarifying what *not* to do is the only answer. Are these the only ways Christians can or should talk about sex? I think not.

OUR PRIMARY IDENTITY: BEING A CHRISTIAN

Christian talk about sexuality begins with the identity that we all share, because it begins with the body that we all are part of. In fact, before we begin talking about sex, we should break bread and drink wine in memory of God's Son—that is, we need to make sure we're ready to hear God's part in the conversation. Next, inviting God's participation in Christian talk about sex demands careful attention to Scripture and tradition.

As a teaching theologian of the church, I get questions about what Scripture says about divorce and remarriage, the new genetic technologies, weapons of mass

destruction, homosexuality, heterosexuality, and in-vitro fertilization. In my darker moments I have come to regard this enterprise as the hermeneutics of narcissism: "What does the Bible say about ME, ME, ME?" If we turn to the Bible only for advice on *our* conduct, we miss the great story it tells us about *God's* conduct. Scripture unfolds the ethics of God in dazzling detail: the mystery of creation and fall; the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the Spirit who persistently bears us up, often in spite of ourselves.

The apostle Paul understood Scripture as the ethics of God, and

he probed it for wisdom on any number of vexing spiritual and moral problems. Among them was sexuality, and Paul talked about sex all over the ancient world to vastly different communities that had dizzyingly different practices. In the midst of such diversity Paul focused on baptism as a common identity. He did not always tell people what to do, but he was quite clear about what God had done for them in Christ Jesus. He framed Christian identity as a matter of baptismal belonging: "you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Corinthians 3.23). *Who* you are depends upon *whose* you are.

OUR PRIMARY ORIENTATION: THE BODY OF CHRIST

This truth means that when Christians think about sexuality, Christ's is the body they ought to think about first. Anything that threatens to displace that primary identity in this body must be put to death: identification with a nation, an ethnic group, a career, a family, a status in life, a sexual orientation, a spouse or partner. These false gods must die and be resurrected and reoriented to Christ. I was introduced to a young scholar several years ago

who was particular about her primary identity. She wanted to be identified as a "feminist Christian," not a "Christian feminist." I asked about the difference, and she replied with conviction: "I want people to know where my center of gravity is. For me *Christian* is the dominant noun, not the modifying adjective."

How much more important is primary identity when it concerns sexuality, where such powerful forces are at play? We joke about

people being "in lust" rather than "in love," but the sobering truth is that any of us could be swept away in a high tide of sexual desire. I watch my teenage nieces moon around the house. Their emotional maturity lags far behind their physical maturity, and they notice that boys are noticing them. Can baptism give them a center of gravity, a way of respecting themselves as a precious and God-pleasing integrity of body, mind, soul, and spirit? I believe it can.

As Luther looked around, he saw many clerics who had taken a vow of celibacy but were hiding away wives and children. They were doing good ministry but found it impossible to be celibate. These couples were “married in the sight of God,” he concluded, so why could they not be married in the eyes of the church? Luther protested the requirement of celibacy for the priesthood: “The pope has as little power to command this as he has to forbid eating, drinking, the natural movement

of the bowels, or growing fat.” He still understood celibacy as a gift, but he could see that it was rarely given. For Luther, sexual activity was simply part of being human, another bodily function like eating, drinking, aging. He wanted neither to romanticize nor to demonize sex but to acknowledge and accept its proper use.

Christians would do well to adopt Luther’s healthy realism about sexuality. Elevated language about sex as a gift makes it all the more difficult to address

the dangers that lurk in sexuality: manipulation, objectification, the withholding of affection, adultery, molestation, incest, and rape. How many young people have fallen for lofty rhetoric only to find their first sexual experience disappointing? How many long-married people wonder if the sex they have is good enough or often enough? Luther’s robust realism offers a corrective to romanticized notions of sexuality as well as a platform for addressing abuses of it.

OUR PRIMARY BEHAVIOR: DEFINED BY BAPTISM

How would a new approach wedding Luther’s robust realism with the ethics of God affect our thinking about sexuality? Does baptism make a difference, and if so, what difference? A common identity in baptism makes a big difference in sexual conduct. We still “mind our p’s and q’s,” but baptism makes three *p*’s stand out: the *public* character of sexuality, the *promises* that protect sexuality, and the *positive* values of sexuality, the good it contributes to God’s creation.

1. THE PUBLIC CHARACTER OF SEXUALITY

A prominent theologian declares that Christians are interested only in “sex in public”! That statement

has a bit of shock appeal, but it’s not far wrong. Far from being an act only between two consenting adults, Christian sexuality is a crowded undertaking. What happens to one person affects the whole body of the church. Think about how your congregation responds to a pregnant teenager in its midst, a divorcing couple, a single person, or a new widow or widower at a church gathering. These are folks whose sexuality is public knowledge. Because we are baptized into the body of Christ, what happens to any of the bodies in our midst affects the whole. How do we tend the body? How can we re-member all people in the body of Christ?

2. THE PROMISES THAT PROTECT SEXUALITY

Baptism features a web of promises: promises by parents and godparents, promises before God, promises by a gathered community, promises on behalf of a squalling infant. Everyone *lives into* the promises they make at this ceremony. No one has either the human capacity or the sheer guts to live out these promises on her own. Call it unpredictability or plain old sin, but we have trouble guaranteeing today who we will be tomorrow. Publicly made and prayerfully tended, promises help us keep faith.

Marriage or blessing ceremonies are a symphony of prom-

sex ought to do some good for the world Christ came to save

ises. Most weddings showcase the promises between the couple, but the couple survives only because of promises made by the community to support and admonish them and because of promises made by God and before God. Promises hold people together even when they'd rather square off in opposite corners. I remember having dinner with friends after my spouse and I had had a heated argument. Our friends expected us to be the animated, loving couple we usually are, and gradually the warmth of their affection for us resurrected our deep affection for each other. They loved us into being the people we had promised to be.

Borrowing Luther's realism, we could say that sexuality is not so much a gift as a powder keg. It's a volatile part of human nature because it renders us so utterly vulnerable. Physical nakedness is not the problem; we manage that in locker rooms with minimal embarrassment. Rather, the other kinds of nakedness—emotional, intellectual, even spiritual nakedness—can light a fuse that could blow us sky-high. The psalmist was right: We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). Promises protect us, safeguarding

us and what we have shared. They are the greenhouse for a love that sustains intimacy.

3. THE POSITIVE VALUES OF SEXUALITY

Finally, talk about sex that begins with baptism can dare to speak about sexuality positively. Sexual ethics then moves from a list of “thou shalt nots” to a positive platform for service to God and neighbor. If we are members of the body of Christ, sex ought to do some good for the world Christ came to save.

Christian sexuality ought to be directed by positive norms of fidelity, generativity, and service. *Fidelity* between two people imitates the faithfulness of God in Christ. After all, Jesus didn't discard the disciples because of their complaining, cluelessness, and disloyalty. He stuck with them, leaving them and us an incarnate example of fidelity. *Generativity* demands that Christians “pay back” the good gifts they have received by “paying forward” something for the next generation. Some will contribute children and grandchildren; others will teach and tutor. In signaling an obligation to the future, generativity embodies hope. Finally,

service ought to be a part of sexuality. Marriage does not give permission for two people to form their own hermetically sealed dyad but rather invites us to serve the neighbor and those in need. One of my colleagues builds houses for Habitat for Humanity once a month. His wife does not join him, but as he says, “I leave her with the chores for that day. That's her contribution.” They work in different parts of the vineyard, joined by a common commitment to service. Fidelity, generativity, and service: if Christians draw on their first language of faith, they can find some positive things to say about sexuality.

Christian talk about sex should begin at the baptismal font. We need to resurrect our first language of faith when we talk about sex. For Christians our primary identity is being a Christian; our primary orientation is to the body of Christ; our primary behavior is defined by baptism. If we begin at the font, we will discover a common calling to the lifestyle of discipleship.

Martha Ellen Stortz is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California.

Sister Judith Bukambu, a deaconess in the Northwestern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, has worked with AIDS orphans since 1996. Her agency, HUYAWA, a ministry of the church, serves more than 50,000 children orphaned by AIDS in the Kagera region of Tanzania. HUYAWA works to promote the well-being of AIDS orphans, their families, and their communities by

- educating vulnerable women and young people about preventing HIV/AIDS,
- providing home care for HIV/AIDS orphans and dying parents,
- covering the cost of treatment for malaria, flu, tuberculosis, and other infections that prey on the HIV-positive,
- advocating for children whose property rights are threatened,
- providing school fees and uniforms so that orphans can go to school,
- offering soap, bedding, clothing, food, and other necessities for children living on their own or with relatives.

This work is not easy, but it is so very necessary. What follows is an account of one of Bukambu's recent experiences.

Finding Jesus in Africa

Sister Judith Bukambu, as told to Anne Baye

Through my work with HUYAWA, an agency of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, I have met many children who have lost parents and siblings to AIDS. Many have succumbed to the disease themselves.

Each one of us approaches death differently. I want to tell you the story of a boy named Id, whose fear of death was transformed into courage and peace.

Born in 1984, Id was diagnosed with AIDS in 1992. He had seen both parents die of AIDS, and his mother's death

was particularly painful. Id lived with his grandfather and a half-sister, but he might as well have been invisible. To his grandfather, he was already as good as dead.

AIDS orphans are lonely and frightened. With their parents gone, they have no one to bring them a drink of water at night. No one to reach out to them when they are groaning in pain. No one to hold them and tell them that everything will be all right. Nobody is there for these children. Even uncles and aunts can never take the place of a mother. I know that Id's half-



sister slept deeply at night—not like a parent, who always listens with half an ear.

It's no wonder that for the first three years I knew Id, he never smiled. Do you think you know loneliness? I saw it in Id's lifeless, joyless, and hopeless eyes.

Because his family neglected him, Id needed food and clothing. In Tanzania, where medicine for HIV/AIDS treatment is expensive, nutrition makes the difference between health and illness. Protein is especially important for HIV/AIDS patients. To keep Id healthy, we gave him peanuts,

milk, and *daaga*, a small herring-like fish.

Still, Id grew sick and had to be hospitalized. When he began to suffer from high fever, vomiting, and rashes as his mother had, he was very afraid. He knew he might die. When it was time for him to leave the hospital, he refused to go home. After all, that is where he had watched his own mother die. Since she had died at home, he thought he would too. Eventually one of our field workers coaxed him into going home, but it was like leading a lamb to the slaughter.

For quite a while, Id was in

and out of the hospital. When he was out, he would slowly walk the eight kilometers to our office and then quietly sit on a bench outside. With frequent stops, this walk might take three hours each way. When I greeted him, Id sat and looked at me without a smile. His eyes were dead. He could sit for an hour without speaking! His eyes seemed skeptical, as if he questioned the value of our work, knowing that he would die anyway.

The only thing that made this young boy smile was soccer. His walls at home were covered with pictures of different players and teams.

So the HUYAWA staff gave him a soccer ball. He didn't have the strength to play, but it helped him make friends.

When Id turned 11, we enrolled him in primary school. His grandfather had been so sure Id would die that he had never bothered to send him to school. Id was sick on and off, but he tried to do his best at school for 18 months before stopping.

In 1999, Id asked for a bicycle. Because his condition was getting worse, we thought of it as his last request. "Let's give him something that brings him joy," our staff thought, "something for him to look forward to."

Some months later, he asked for a green suit—for Christmas, he said. Surely, we thought, this is his last request. We gave him the suit, but he didn't wear it. Soon, though, he began to decline. As each month passed, we feared he would not live to see the next one.

During his illness, he began to ask questions of our deaconess Sister Juliana. "Is there joy in heaven?" he asked. Yes, she replied, because Jesus is in heaven. "Do you think Jesus takes care of people who die?" Yes, said Juliana; he loves them and has prepared a place for them. "Do you think Jesus takes care of children when they die?" Yes. "Do

you think Jesus would take care of me if I died?" Of course.

Finally, Id asked to be baptized. He asked this very insistently. Each time a HUYAWA worker visited him in the hospital, he requested baptism. When he was discharged from the hospital in May, we arranged a baptism for a few days later. By then, he could hardly walk or talk.

In Tanzania, we celebrate three feasts in life: birth, marriage, and death. The only one we actually witness ourselves is marriage. We knew Id would not see marriage, so we decided to make his baptism a good one. About 70 people came, many from his village, and we served cookies and soda.

Id was baptized outside his home wearing his green suit. He selected as his godparents a HUYAWA field assistant and his wife—the man had visited him at home, taken him to the hospital, and given him milk. For his baptismal name (following his family's custom), he chose the name Projectus.

During the baptism, we sang and cried for joy—and also because we thought this would surely be his last feast. It looked as if he would die soon. But Id recovered again! He got up and walked to his neighbor's house for a visit. He rode his bicycle the

eight kilometers to our office. He lived another two years before breathing his last in May 2002. He was buried in his green suit, surrounded by flowers.

Id's death was a great loss, and I still miss him. Sometimes I find myself thinking "I should take this to Id" before I remember that he is dead.

But I am glad that before his death, his questions were answered and his faith affirmed. Though his own family had overlooked his health care, his schooling, and his spiritual upbringing, HUYAWA staff stepped in to provide daily bread, to encourage him to go to school, to explain Jesus to him, and to answer the questions he had wondered about all along.

As Projectus, a baptized Christian, Id had no fear of death. Before his death he told a HUYAWA worker, "People are afraid to die. But I am not. It is the thought of dying an undignified death that frightens me!" I am sure that Id saw Jesus coming to him as he died and that he met death with a smile on his face.

In the summer of 2003, Anne Basye hosted Judith Bukambu in her home while Bukambu spoke to ELCA synod assemblies about AIDS and the ELCA's Stand with Africa campaign.



DOES YOUR CONGREGATION OR WOMEN'S GROUP HOLD CLOTHING DRIVES OR RUN A SOUP KITCHEN OR FOOD PANTRY? SHARE YOUR TIPS FOR STARTING AND MAINTAINING THESE MINISTRIES.

We hold an annual clothing drive each May. We call it "Closet Cleaning Time." We receive good used clothing in all sizes. We sort the clothes according to size, bag them, and label the outside of each bag with the clothing size. Our contact person calls local agencies to find out their needs, so that we can donate the appropriate items.

This is the fourth year we have held the clothing drive, and our congregation is so generous in giving wonderful, good-quality clothing. Their dedication and support to this project are indescribable and greatly appreciated.

Lorraine Carlson—Superior, Wis.

Our Savior's Lutheran Church

Every month when my circle meets, each member brings items that we in turn donate to the Shelter House in nearby Willmar. The folks at Shelter House are always most appreciative of our efforts. At Christmastime we bring many new items that can be wrapped as gifts by Shelter House employees.

This project has given the members of Cana Circle a sense of helping those in distress as well as obeying our Lord's command to help the less fortunate. It has been truly amazing for us to take part in efforts like this one.

Dorcas J. Garvley—New London, Minn.

Peace Lutheran Church

At my congregation's annual Baby Shower, women bring baby clothes and all sorts of gifts that make up layette packages. The packages are taken to our local Crisis House, where new mothers or expectant moms are given these special gifts.

Crisis House dispenses baby clothes, diapers, and baby food to new mothers who are financially unable to buy these things. The agency is also an emergency source for food for the homeless. This is how we, as women of the church, reach out to our community with love and understanding.

Julie Batchelor—La Mesa, Calif.

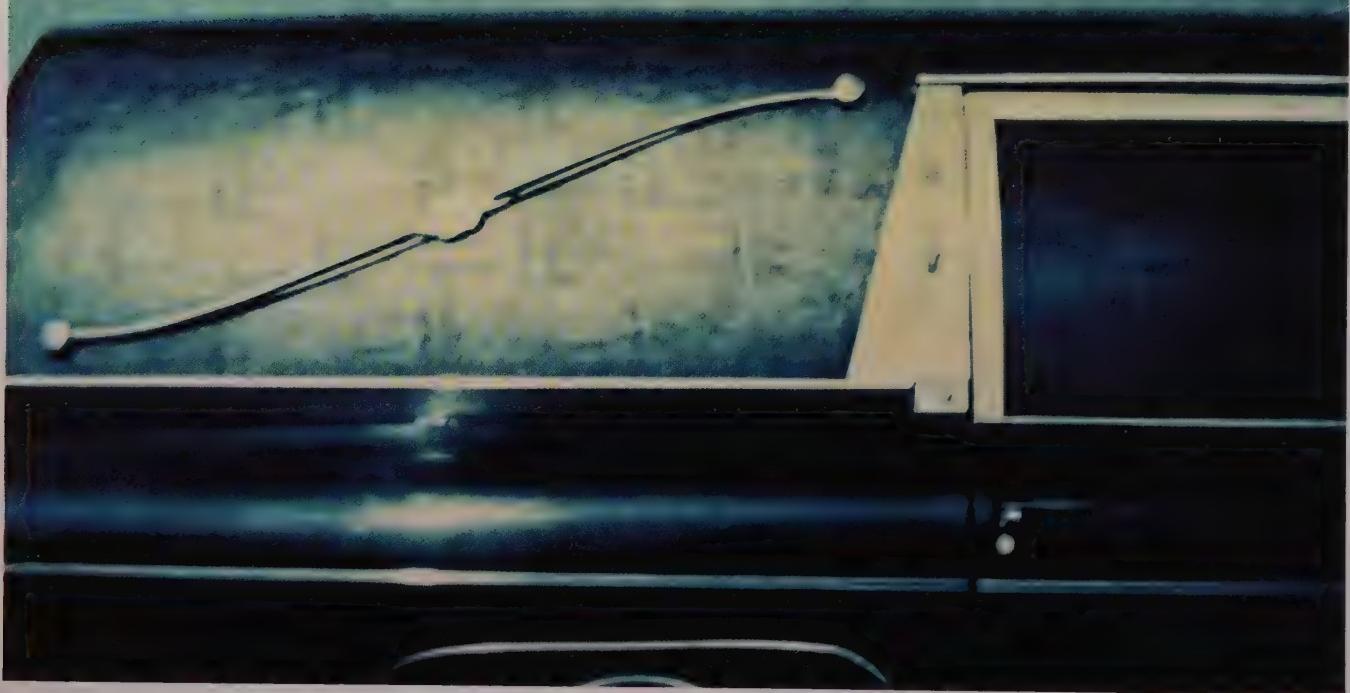
St. Luke's Lutheran Church

Each November for the past 15 years, our women's group has collected food and monetary donations for Thanksgiving dinner for the battered women's shelter in Eagan, Minnesota. The last three years we have increased our efforts by challenging the congregation to support not only the shelter but also the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. Last year we collected over 1,000 pounds of food for the food shelf and the shelter and over \$20,000 for the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. The joint effort helps the congregation realize that hunger is a problem at home as well as abroad.

Robin Kieffer—Eagan, Minn.

Easter Lutheran Church

ON DEATH AND DYING



THE GIFT by CJ Hines

"He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:32)

Did a friend ever surprise you with a gift? It wasn't your birthday or a holiday, but there it was. You were so overwhelmed by her kindness, yet you asked, "Why? What's the occasion?" And your friend replied: "Because I saw it, and it reminded me of you." Or "I knew you were feeling down and thought it would cheer you up."

We are blessed to have such friends. God is the same way, giving us boundless gifts each day—a cloudless blue sky, a cool evening breeze, a golden sunset—for no special reason. God gives these gifts even when we don't deserve them, just because God loves us that much.

When we're hurting, though, we may think that God has forgotten about us. We need to remember that God—the One who gave us the ultimate gift of Jesus Christ—has promised not to fail us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:8).

When someone you love dies, do you think it's a coincidence that you're surrounded by compassionate, loving people—from friends, family members, and co-workers to the funeral home director, minister, and church staff? Do you think it's just lucky that you hear God's word when you need it the most? No. God knows what we need when we need it, whether it's a hug from a friend or a reassuring verse from the Bible.

That's not to say that dealing with death is easy. I don't know anyone who looks forward to funerals. But imagine what it would be like if we did nothing when people died: no visitation, no funeral, no remembrances. What if we removed any trace

that the person had ever lived, never speaking of him or her again? Not only would we be dishonoring our loved one's memory; we would be dishonoring God's gift of the person's presence in our lives. God showed me this after my mother died three years ago.

FINDING SHELTER

My parents hadn't planned their funerals or bought a cemetery plot, so when Mom died, Dad, my brothers, and I were overwhelmed by the details—making funeral arrangements, notifying relatives, deciding what to do with her possessions, and a hundred other things.

At the funeral home came an onslaught of questions. What do you want the obituary to say? Do you want to include a photo? Do you have a special outfit for her to wear? Are relatives traveling a long distance? When do you want to hold the visitation? What about a photo display?

Then the minister had more questions. What was Bette's favorite Scripture? What hymns do you want? Who are the pall-bearers? Do you want a luncheon? How many people do you expect? I was numb.

On the day of Mom's funeral I remember thinking, "I don't want to do this. I just want to curl

up in a ball and cry until I have no tears left." But Mom was more than a mother—she was my best friend, confidante, spiritual adviser. She had given me so much; attending her funeral was a small thing to do in comparison.

Before the service, the minister led the family into a room for prayer. He began by saying, "We thank you, God, for the gift of Bette." I will never forget that—Mom was God's gift to all of us.

For the service, we had selected hymns of praise and assurance of God's promises: "Amazing Grace," "How Great Thou Art," and "In the Garden." The minister also read Mom's favorite Scripture, Psalm 91. Since being diagnosed several years before with polymyositis, a progressive muscular disease, Mom had drawn strength from this psalm, keeping it at her bedside table: "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'"

LASTING COMFORT

Mom didn't know what God had planned for her, but she knew she could trust God. This Scripture that had comforted Mom during her long illness comforted me in her death.

Mom's death has taught me about how much God cares for me. From the day she died until after her funeral, God gave me the strength to put my own emotions on hold. I always knew God was wise beyond my imagination but didn't fully understand how God protected me during difficult times.

God knew that I was grieving and felt helpless. So God showered me with gifts, putting caring people in my life—"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). I was reminded that God will never leave my side and reassured through the word that someday the pain will lessen: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy" (Psalm 126:5).

God also revealed to me how blessed I am to have had Mom in my life. I always knew we had a special bond, but, as the minister reminded me, Bette was a gift. God puts special people in our lives to help us on our spiritual journey. God also uses people's deaths to reassure us about everlasting life and to teach us not to fear death. That was "the gift of Bette."

CJ Hines, a marketing specialist for an advertising agency, is a former newspaper reporter and editor. She lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

SEEING JESUS

by Barbara Berry-Bailey

There's a saying that's attributed to boxer Joe Louis: "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die."

An episode of *The Twilight Zone*, the popular television series that aired from 1959 to 1964, tells a story that illustrates Louis's words.¹ Wanda Dunn is an elderly woman who lives alone in an apartment in a dilapidated brownstone. She spends her days in bed, rising only to make sure that the door is securely locked.

One day she hears gunshots, and a policeman falls down the steps, landing at her door. He persuades Wanda to drag him into her apartment.

Wanda tells him that she has no phone and that all her neighbors moved away years ago. She can't risk letting anybody in, because that somebody might be Mr. Death, who has been trying to sneak into her apartment for some time.

Wanda thinks that only she can see Death because she is old and her time is coming soon. She claims that Death's face is always changing. So, to keep from meeting Death, she keeps her door locked and hasn't been out in years. Wanda has traded the sunlight of freedom for the darkness and cold of isolation, but she feels this is the only way she can keep Death at bay.

Then a contractor, sent to warn Wanda that the building is going to be demolished, barges in. Wanda begs the policeman to persuade the contractor to let her stay, but the contractor can't see him. When the contractor leaves, Wanda realizes who the policeman really is.

"You tricked me! It was you all the time. But why? The moment I let you inside, you could have taken me at any time. But you were nice. You made me trust you."

"But I had to make you understand. Am I really so bad? Am I

"everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.



really so frightening? You've talked to me and confided in me. Have I tried to hurt you? It isn't me you're afraid of. You understand me. What you're afraid of is the unknown. Don't be afraid."

"But I am afraid. I don't want to die."

"The running's over. It's time to rest. Give me your hand."

Wanda reaches out to take his hand.

"You see. No shock. No engulfment. No tearing asunder. What you feared would come like an explosion is like a whisper. What you thought was the end is the beginning."

"When will it happen? When will we go?" Wanda asks.

"Go?" said the policeman. "Look. We have already begun."

A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

Although we regularly confess, "I believe in . . . the life everlasting," many Christians fear death. The manner in which death might come, the loneliness we feel when we think about leaving loved ones behind, and our uncertainty of what awaits us beyond this earthly life are just a few of the reasons. And each of us has a different image of what heaven is.

A far better understanding of death was given to me 20 years ago by my son, then a preschooler.

"Momma," he said one summer day, "I want to *see* Jesus."

I began paging through a book of Bible stories for an appropriate story about Jesus.

Realizing I was far off the mark, he pointed to his eyes. "No, I want to see Jesus, for real."

"So do I, sweetheart," I replied, "but the only way to see Jesus for real is when we die."

"I know," he said with certainty but still some curiosity in his voice. A heavy silence hung between us for a moment.

"And *no one* gets to come back and tell what they've seen. Once you go, you're gone," I said in a warning tone, but I was frightened to the bone.

For years I worried that he might do something to put his life in jeopardy in order to "see Jesus"; not to kill himself but, rather, to go "see Jesus." Today he is alive and well, married, and father to a child who will most likely one day have the same desire to see Jesus.

SEEING JESUS

I think that a child's perspective is critical to a Christian understanding of death and dying. Death is the locked door that must be opened in order for us to see Jesus, in order for us to receive tomorrow the treasures that we

today confess await us. The illness and pain we face are the cold and darkness that we sometimes cling to for fear of what is beyond the door. Fear and ignorance of what lies beyond make us conjure images of loss, images of "tearing asunder" and "explosion."

Be mindful: It is not only in death that we see Jesus the Christ. Christ comes to us daily—in the love and comfort of the human beings who are his agents, as well as in challenges that we fear we cannot endure but then discover that through God's grace we not only endured but triumphed over.

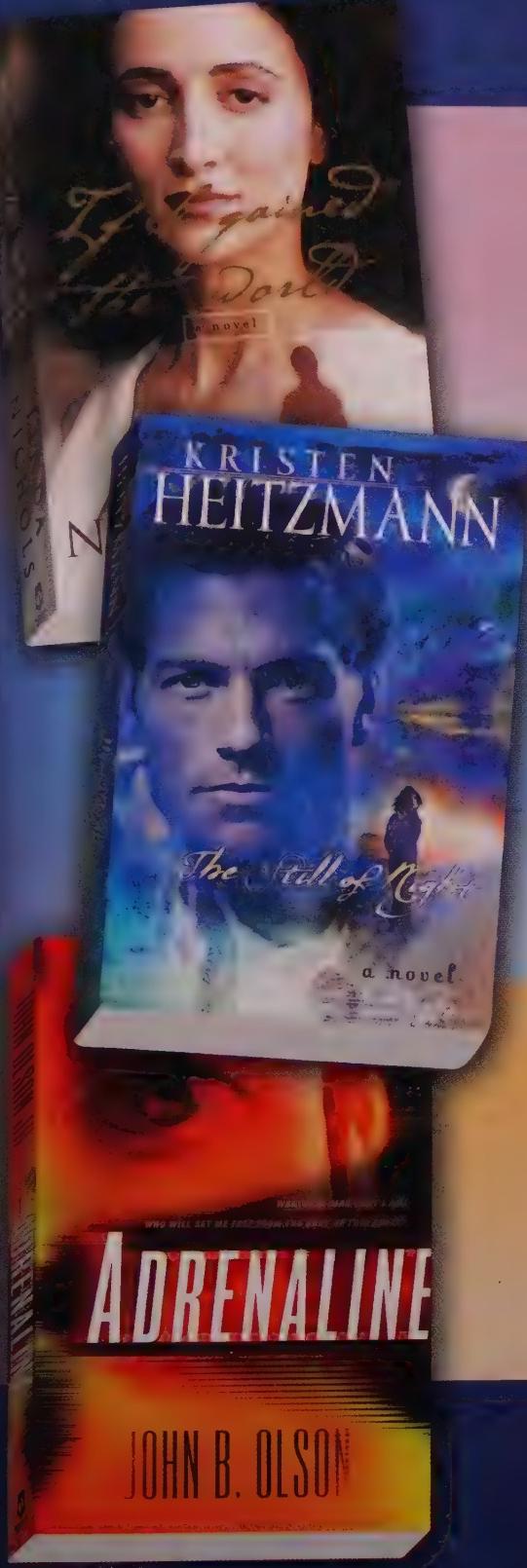
Sometimes we are aware of the approach of death. Other times it is as unexpected as a snowstorm in June. But when it is time to end our earthly journey, we need not fear what is on the other side of the door. Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, with a hand extended, waits to receive us. And then, we shall see Jesus, for real.

Reverend Barbara Berry-Bailey is the assistant director for worship in the ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries.

NOTE

1. From *The Twilight Zone*, episode 81: "Nothing in the Dark," by George Clayton Johnson.

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THE MOTHER'S LAMENT

by Joyce M. Bowers

FACTS OF GRIEF

Editors' note: These two prayers express the author's reflections on the death of her sister-in-law, Margie Bowers. The first, a lament, was written as the author observed the profound grief of Margie's mother. The second, written 26 years later, reflects on God's healing and hope-giving presence.

she is gone

my beloved

cherished

only daughter

dear, sweet Margie

my best friend

who loved

and understood

and cared

it was so sudden

so ugly

violent

senseless

unnecessary

he should have been in jail

but he murdered my daughter

my gentle, lovely daughter

only twenty-five years old

I weep

grief overwhelms me

I weep

desolation and sorrow possess my soul

I weep

my tears are endless

how can it be possible

to feel such pain

my God, how I long for your comfort

but you are not there

you speak to others

but say nothing to me

you are deaf to my crying

you ignore my tears

where is your love and care

when I need it most

people are concerned

friends pray for me

they send cards

poems

remembrances

but you, my God,

to whom I have given my life

are as cold and still

as a tombstone on a winter's night

I am your servant

I will never understand

why you have abandoned me

what would I do without Carolyn
who comes to sit with me

hear my anguish

touch me tenderly

and add her tears to my own

she has come faithfully

for many weeks

but you, my God,

are so distant

you don't visit

or listen

or cry

Joyce M. Bowers is a sister-in-law of the late Margie Bowers, whose life began in 1952 as a missionary child in Liberia and ended in 1977 in Oak Park, Ill. Bowers is indebted to author and priest Joseph Nassal, CPPS, for the concept "hope for the past."

HOPE FOR THE PAST

by Joyce M. Bowers

Gracious God, Loving Mystery, eternal I AM:
You are always and everywhere present, in all time and space.
You inhabit our yesterdays as surely as our todays,
giving hope for the past as well as the future.

You are solace for Margie's weeping mother.
The cards and prayers and visits express your care,
though grief blinded her eyes to your presence.

You are healing through twenty-six years that have passed:
you blur the sharp edges of pain;
you hallow the tears of family and friends.
In your celestial spinning wheel, memories of straw are spun into gold.

You are insight and grace in Margie's brother Tom, ten years after the tragedy,
speaking words of peace to Margie's housemate,
freeing her from a crushing burden of false guilt.

You are the "hound of heaven" fifteen years after Margie's death,
pursuing Tom, prodding him to find a way to forgive her killer.
You give wings to stories published about that forgiveness;
unknown thousands sense the mystery of your presence.

You are the unseen companion of the man who took Margie's life,
spending his own sad life in a maximum-security prison--
lonely, not talking much, "growing old in the joint."
You sit beside him in the church services he still attends
and grace the Bible studies led by volunteers.

You guide Margie's hand, composing a prayer in her diary,
"to be a signet ring for God,
to leave the imprint of Christ's image
when pressed into the circumstances of life."

You honor that prayer through unchosen paths and unforeseen pain,
giving hope for the past and consolation for the present
and faith to dance to the music of the future.



Session 3

The Pleasure of Your Company

by Robin Mattison

Study Text

1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

Theme Verse

“Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.” (1 Thessalonians 4:1)

Overview

When these verses were written, Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, and the Thessalonians were still separated, and the Thessalonians were still eager to proclaim the good news of God acting in the present through Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, life went on. How might the Thessalonians walk in holiness as Christians in their hometown, where their neighbors practiced sexual and social ethics that they wanted to avoid? Paul addresses their concerns by calling again on (1) their direct present relationship with God; (2) their ability to imitate the faithful team of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy; and (3) his own certainty that God will avenge injustice toward others. Furthermore, Paul assures the Thessalonians that God is pleased with them!

Opening

Read aloud the theme verse, 1 Thessalonians 4:1. Paul commends the Thessalonians' commitment to a

holy life before asking them to do anything different or anything more.

Many times, hearing a positive word from someone makes all the difference between absorbing or not absorbing a correcting message. Who has helped you change your walk in God's holiness by starting with the positive? Share a bit about that experience. Also share times when you kept this balance of commanding and correcting another.

Pray together that you might continue to follow this way of being loving to others. Take turns reading 1 Thessalonians 4:1, substituting a fellow participant's name for “brothers and sisters,” so that each person gets to hear herself named as someone with whom God is pleased. For example, “Finally, Joanne, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.” If any group members have received difficult news in their work or home life this week (layoffs, negative work evaluations, broken relationships), pray for them now.

God's Pleasure, God's Holiness, God's Honor

1. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8. In Greek, the word *sanctification* (4:3) is the same as the word *holiness*. How many times is *sanctification* or *holiness* used in this passage? What is the opposite of *holiness* to Paul? How did it happen that these

Gentiles, who had never learned the Law, had received holiness (4:7)?

For Paul, holiness is the integrity of power, justice, mercy, and present availability that marks every interaction that God has had with human beings since Christ came in the flesh. God shared this holiness with the Thessalonians through the *Holy Spirit* at their conversion. Paul knew that God had not shared this Spirit of holiness only once, in the past. The Holy Spirit is part of them! “This is the will of God: *your sanctification [your holiness]*” (4:3). Amazing! God’s integrity and availability suffuse the Thessalonians’ lives “from the inside.”

You’re a Smith!

Though they were apart from the Thessalonians, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy desired that, through their testimony, the Thessalonians would receive Jesus’ and God’s instruction in holiness (4:2, 9) and

carry it out “more and more” (4:10). Then their new integrity could reshape the way they saw the situations and temptations in their city. Biblical scholar Beverly Gaventa likened Paul’s reminder to the Thessalonians to your mom’s calling after you as you went out to play, “Remember, you’re a Smith!”¹ When Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, those nursing mothers and advising fathers (2:7, 11), wrote to the Thessalonians, they wanted to do more than recommend certain actions—they aimed to have the Thessalonians remember that their “parents” called them in love and hope to another way of life.

2. Do you have any stories like Gaventa’s example? Do you experience being urged toward holiness as similar to being shaped in a family?

Walking in Holiness

Paul affirms in 1 Thessalonians 4:1 that the Thessalonians had already in some ways learned how to live

CULTURE CLASH

Is Paul talking about public morality when he mentions walking in holiness? Only partially. He was thinking more about how the Thessalonians might imitate Jesus’ pleasing walk with God. They would then be rejoicing witnesses to the One True God’s intervention for justice and mercy, as Jesus is.

Although Gentile perspectives on morality and immorality varied, none focused on the pleasure of

God’s company. In the Greco-Roman culture, public morality had to do with how well a person fulfilled his or her social role. These social roles were based on various personal characteristics, some unchangeable, such as gender. For example, in family life, a son was expected to follow certain rules, and these rules were different for his sister, mother, father, slave. Each member of the household had a different social role and was honored or shamed by how reliably he or she carried out that role. Other social roles, each

with its own public morality, could change according to age, enslavement, or temporary public service. Paul’s concern with all such distinctions was that they focused on human standards and not on God’s emerging judgment and offer of salvation through Christ.

Read Galatians 3:27–28. How are these verses a comment on social roles? How do Christians in our society still struggle with social roles, social values, and our unity as Christ’s body?

(the Greek is “how to walk,” *peripateo*) and please God. Coming into fellowship with Jesus as their Lord and becoming examples to imitate are pleasing to God. The image of “walking in holiness” is one that Paul brought to Christianity from his Jewish tradition. It gives believers a way to think of their lives with God as a companionship. Life is not simply a collection of acts awaiting judgment or approval; rather, God’s pleasure is in the Thessalonians’ following a “walking course” of works of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope in their Lord Jesus Christ (1:3). Such a walking course varies among individuals in the same way that Paul’s walking in holiness in a Gentile land no longer matched the “walking” of the Jewish Christians in Judea.

3. How does the notion of “walking in holiness” contrast with the notion of achieving perfection through the accomplishment of individual acts?

Sexual Ethics among Believers and Nonbelievers

4. Reread 1 Thessalonians 4:3–9. Paul cites three values in this passage that give evidence of the Thessalonians’ walk in holiness. They are listed below. Paul also makes clear that some actions known among the Gentiles would hinder the Thessalonians’ walk in holiness. Fill in below the three negative values that Paul set in opposition to the positive ones.

- a. (4:1–2) The Thessalonians please God and know Jesus’ instructions, whereas (4:5) the Gentiles _____.
- b. (4:3–4) The Thessalonians abstain from fornication and control their bodies, whereas (4:5) the Gentiles _____.
- c. (4:9) The Thessalonians love one another, whereas (4:6) the Gentiles _____.

Walking in Holiness in Matters of Sex

Paul’s view of walking in holiness in matters of sex was greatly influenced, in a good way, by his background as a Pharisee. Through God’s revelation in the Old Testament, Paul valued sexual relations in marriage, conducted in holiness and honor. He realized that this holiness would be hard for Christians to maintain in a Greco-Roman society.

The Greco-Roman Gentiles regularly scandalized the Jews, especially by the sexual license granted to men of wealth and power. Such permissiveness had a strong effect on others, whether they agreed with these norms or not. Imagine Christian slave women trying to walk in holiness in a culture that did not recognize their religious commitment to abstain from sex outside of marriage!

Since Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy had earlier given the Thessalonians the Lord’s word on sexual relations (4:2), why would they need to urge and encourage the Thessalonians again? Because the Christian men of Thessalonica were being asked to give up sexual customs that other non-Christian men—their own neighbors—would still be enjoying. The assembly needed Christian men and Christian women to live by and support the same values.

Therefore, Paul negatively categorized their former sexual activities as fornication, *porneia*. This word covered all kinds of sexual activity outside marriage: premarital, extramarital, and nonmarital.

The phrase translated “lustful passion” in 1 Thessalonians 4:5 has led many to think that Paul is passing judgment on all sexual relations. However, the word that the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates as “passion,” *pathē*, is more properly translated “experience.” Paul’s concern was the adjective alongside it, *epithumia*, meaning “coveting lust.” Therefore, the Thessalonians knew that Paul was talking about abstaining from covetous lust, not

marital bliss. For more about Paul's view of marital bliss, read 1 Corinthians 7:1–11.

5. Have you ever broken a bad habit? How hard was it to do so? Now imagine that the habit you need to break is a culturally approved custom that everyone else considers “normal” and “just the way it is.” What help would you want from God and your company of believers to change your walk with God and resist backsliding?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:6, Paul expresses his additional recommendation for holiness, “that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter.” Lust and exploitation are two facets of the larger issue of “coveting” for Paul. The evil behind covetousness is idolatry, named in the first of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17). Lust and exploitation represent occasions where people please themselves rather than conducting themselves in a manner that pleases God. As they do so, they misuse others for their own pleasure. Was Paul correct in thinking that lust and exploitation would be a problem in the Gentile communities he founded? In 1 Corinthians 5:1–5, Paul describes a Christian who was living with his father’s wife. Paul calls the entire assembly impure for tolerating behavior that even the Gentiles would not!

Paul calls the Lord a present avenger in these matters (4:6). That statement means that Paul sees fornication as fundamentally wrong, both toward God and toward others. Although we who hear this declaration may fear that such wrath will come upon us, Paul’s point is that this wrath was confronting the Gentile world (as it once confronted Paul in Judaism) as a means to call people to honor God and not themselves. If other Gentiles were converted as the Thessalonians had been, then they too would have

joy and the gift of the Holy Spirit. They too could walk in holiness and please God.

6. Why do sexual situations lend themselves to covetousness, idolatry, and an imbalance of power in relationships? How are even our best efforts toward romantic love tangled up in our wanting to find one person who will please *us* all the time?

HOW INCLUSIVE IS PAUL?

1 Thessalonians 4:4 is a difficult verse for translators. Two common translation options are (1) “that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor” (NRSV) and (2) “that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor” (RSV). Both translations struggle with the Greek word for “vessel” (*skeuos*). Is the vessel in question a believer’s own body? If so, the literal Greek, “taking to oneself one’s own body,” is an unusual construction. If the vessel in question means “wife,” as the RSV has translated, it runs counter to Paul’s use of vessel as “clay jar” in 2 Corinthians 4:7, where it refers to Paul and Timothy.

I would suggest a third way. The use of both a gender-neutral subject, “each one of you,” and a gender-neutral direct object, “vessel,” means that the rules of sexual morality are not to be determined by gender. Therefore, both men and women reading this passage could think of themselves as the ones contracting a holy and honorable relationship with a marital partner. This view would then support abstinence from covetous lust for both men and women in the community.

Go Deeper—Coveting and Idolatry

Read Exodus 20:1–17. How do you see the Ten Commandments as undergirding Paul's concerns in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8? Focus particularly on matters of idolatry and coveting, as discussed in the ninth and tenth commandments.

Read Romans 1:20–23. This is Paul's summary of how he saw that the Gentiles perverted the values of the Ten Commandments (although they did not have the Old Testament).

What parallels and contrasts can you draw between the values of the Ten Commandments, the values Paul put forth in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8, and the values he put forth in Romans 1:20–23?

Walking in Holiness in Matters of Public Life

Paul was delighted that he could see from the Thessalonians' actions toward one another that they were taught by God through the Holy Spirit. They were already sharing *philadelphia*—love for the brothers and the sisters. The holiness that Paul saw in their actions did not come from their reading of the Law; it came as a revelation of the holiness God had given them (4:9). Now Paul turns to the matter of how believers' holiness intersects with the lives of outsiders who are not believers (4:10–12).

7. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12. What does Paul identify as the three marks of public life for believers?

For Paul, walking a life of holiness is fundamental to the continuing witness to God's present activity in the world. Walking in holiness not only is more pleasurable than coveting, with all its anxieties, but allows many more people to experience God's good word, power, and Holy Spirit.

Paul is not recommending that Christians be invis-

ible in society! Instead, he is recommending that a life of social tranquility helps them keep their focus on the amazing transformation that has come into their lives. To see the problems he has in mind we have only to look at 1 Corinthians 6:1–11. There he chastises the Corinthian Christians for taking each other to court (an anxious process based in coveting). His counsel to "mind your own affairs" ties in with his recommendation in Romans 13:1–7 to respect authority. If the Thessalonians put all their energy into railing against the empire's authority, how could they present the empire with the good news of God's wrath *and* mercy?

Working with Your Hands

When Paul says, "work with your hands," he is urging the Thessalonians to avoid the idolatries of public office, which would compromise believers through association with the cult of the emperor. Instead, working with one's hands in a trade allowed for a degree of self-sufficiency, modest contentment, and mobility in case of persecution. For their gospel mission, the Gentiles would need persuading and confronting by the Thessalonians, much as these Christians had once needed to be persuaded and confronted by Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. Therefore, he advised the Thessalonians not to work in public office "day jobs" because of the coveting of power and money that were part of that arena. If they got too involved in the rat race, it would be harder to put God first. (You may want to read 1 Corinthians 9:1–27, where Paul goes into detail on how he, Silvanus, and Timothy work with their hands for the sake of the gospel. See also Acts 18:3, which mentions Paul's trade as a tentmaker.)

If the Thessalonian Christians succeeded in imitating Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy in these matters, Paul would be pleased. He was confident that as the Thessalonians led a tranquil life, minded their own affairs, and worked with their hands *while still proclaiming,*

Gentile nonbelievers would experience the scandal of God's intervention more directly. Such gentleness and proclamation with love for the brothers and the sisters would please God and continue the rejoicing and holiness that the Thessalonians had already experienced.

Paul at the Movies

Paul's concern for the Thessalonians always focused on their behavior as a group (as Gentiles, believers, and so on), not on individual actions apart from their effect on the group. He was eager to have a group identity of "Thessalonian Christians" develop. In particular, he aimed to educate the Thessalonians against the covetousness that lay behind Gentile sexual and social ethics.

Our culture is not without its share of covetousness that affects sexual and social ethics. So let's take Paul to the movies.

8. Let's say Paul went to see one of these movies: *My Fair Lady*, *Pretty Woman*, or *Maid in Manhattan*. What kinds of coveting lie behind the sexual and social ethics in these movies? How do traditional social roles for men and women affect the premises of the movies and shape their outcomes? Paul is confident that it is Jesus who will rescue us from the wrath to come. Who are defined as rescuers in these movies? How would Paul and the women

characters in these movies place a very different meaning on the phrase, "Some day my prince will come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10)?

Closing

Conclude with thanksgivings to God for the pleasure of God's company and prayers for all those who have concerns about their faith. Pray to God that there might always be believers willing to be types, or models, of Christ for them to imitate. Ask that we too might conduct ourselves in holiness and honor even in our most difficult moments. Conclude by saying to one another, "I thank God for the pleasure of your company!"

Looking Ahead

Throughout 1 Thessalonians, Paul has rung chimes about the end time. In our last lesson on 1 Thessalonians, we will finally have a chance to see how Christ's return is a present blessing for all believers. We will be reading 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:28.

The Rev. Dr. Robin Mattison is associate professor of New Testament and Greek at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

Note

1. Beverly Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1998), 54.

this month's QUESTION

Go to www.elca.org/wo/lwt to enter your response.
(Results will appear in the April 2004 issue.)

Q: The topic that I would most like to see explored in a future issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* is this one:

- A. ways to provide opportunities for youth to become engaged in their faith journey
- B. ways to strengthen families so that they can face the challenges that our culture presents
- C. ways that women can act boldly on their faith
- D. ways to be more comfortable sharing my faith

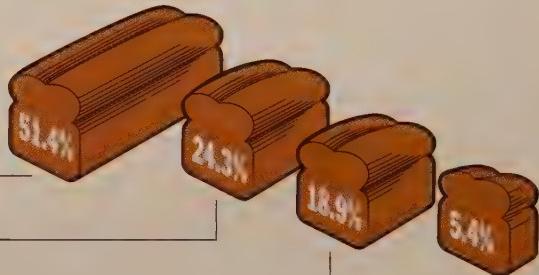
Results from Question of the Month

(June 2003)

Q: Hunger persists in our world, both in the U.S. and abroad. What is the primary way you will help fight hunger this year?

Here's what you said:

I will financially support hunger-fighting programs, such as the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. _____



I will pray for an end to world hunger. _____

I will volunteer time and talents to food pantries and soup kitchens. _____

I will purchase fair-trade items. _____



WOMEN INVESTING IN MISSION

Lutheran women - and the congregational and synodical organizations they have founded - are helping to build the church by investing in the Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA. To learn how you and your women's organization can participate or to obtain current interest rates, call the Fund today at (800) 638-3522, ext. 2943.



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WHAT ACTIONS HAVE YOU TAKEN TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE BALANCE AMONG YOUR OBLIGATIONS TO YOURSELF, TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY, TO YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY, AND AT WORK?

My future as I dreamed it in high school was to become a freelance writer. I was convinced I could balance it all. I discovered, however, that attempting to meet my obligations to friends, family, my faith community, co-workers, and my writing was an impossible task.

The complexity of my job was exhausting me. I am also the primary caregiver for my 81-year-old mother. I had no energy to devote to friends and my church. I was turning away from everything I cared about, including God. In order to achieve the balance I needed in my life, I had to make changes.

I was able to reduce my work week from 40 to 32 hours so that I can devote one day to writing. Mom and I plan carefully to fit in shopping trips, chores, and yard work. My friends comment on the joy and spirit that has returned to my letters, and they take pleasure in celebrating with me. My church family has been instrumental in my recovery. When I doubted God's plan for my life, they prayed for me. Now I will obligate myself only to projects that allow me to maintain the newfound balance in my life.

Margery Vinton—Eugene, Ore.

Although I would not consider myself as "taking action" to create balance among my various obligations, I must be doing so! I am constantly juggling lots of activities and projects—most recently, assisting my daughter and my son-in-law following the birth of their daughter, celebrating significant birthday milestones of my husband and my mother,

and planning a global mission trip. I do work at being as organized as I can, but it is my faith in God and thereby in myself that gives me the strength and comfort to believe that everything I am involved in will work out for the best. I believe also that with maturity and experience come the confidence that in most cases, what I need to accomplish will ultimately be done, and done rather well.

Doris Strieter—Chicago, Ill.

My wise grandmother made me a crewelwork poem when my first child was born:

*Cleaning and scrubbing can wait for tomorrow
For babies grow up, we've learned to our sorrow.
So quiet down cobwebs, dust go to sleep.
I'm rocking my baby—and babies don't keep.*

Now, 23 years later, I know that toddlers don't keep either. Neither do teenagers. Or parents. Or parishioners.

My life is therefore a continuous stream of extenuating circumstances. It's like a Calder mobile shifting and turning in the wind. The balance is maintained because those few things that matter most—God, family, and then work—are delicately but securely wired, with God at the center. Other pieces are suspended from them: schedules, phone calls, sermons, laundry. The light pieces get jostled—and sometimes even drop off! The balance is at the center, where God still calms storms.

Mary Sue Dehmlow Dreier, co-pastor—People of Hope Lutheran Church in Mission, Rochester, Minn.

What does Thanksgiving mean to you? Sharing a traditional stuffed turkey feast with the people you love most? Spending the whole day with your grandchildren? Taking time to give thanks for all your blessings? For many, Thanksgiving is all of these.



Thanksgiving

Sharing More Than a Meal

by Patricia L. Fry

The Thanksgiving celebration also offers opportunities to learn more about one another and to gather that elusive family history. What better time to collect family stories than when everyone is together and in a reminiscent mood?

How can you get Aunt Martha and Grandpa George to talk about their past? How can you arrange interviews with the adults and children alike amid the holiday activity? The key is to be creative and to plan ahead.

Setting the table for good conversation

PREPARE GUESTS TO SHARE THEIR STORIES. Your spoken or written invitation to Thanksgiving dinner might include this request: "Come prepared to tell a story from your childhood, from a memorable Thanksgiving, or about a significant moment in your life." Take turns sharing your stories around the dinner table.

Another idea is to have each guest bring a question to ask the oldest relatives. A few examples: What was your favorite toy as a child? Tell us about your most memorable vacation. Describe your childhood home. What was a school day like when you were in fifth grade? Tell us about the church you were married in.

COME TOGETHER IN THE KITCHEN. Most families have many wonderful memories that involve recipes and food preparation. To inspire the sharing of stories or to collect charming vignettes, invite a relative to help you prepare the holiday meal. Lori, a Maryland resident, often joins her grandmother in the kitchen during the holidays. Not only does she learn some of the family recipes this way, but she also discovers interesting tidbits about her grandmother's life as they prepare food together. "This is a wonderful way to preserve some family culinary history," she says. According to Lori, you can draw out fascinating stories while engaging in casual conversation in the kitchen. "When Nana and I work together, I ask her things like 'When did you first learn how to make this dish?'"

It's easier to get people to open up when they're in a familiar environment. If Grandpa was a pilot in his younger days, drive him out to the airport or watch an airplane video together. Maybe Aunt Lucy traveled with a band in her youth. Attending a concert with her might start a flood of stories. Likewise, 10-year-old Bobby might not have much to say over breakfast at the kitchen table. But sit with him in his tree house, and he might feel more comfortable talking.

OPEN THE BIBLE. The family Bible has many stories to tell. Hand it to the eldest family member on Thanksgiving Day and then be prepared to listen. You may hear tales of family hardship and sacrifice as well as beautiful stories about joyful times.

Planning activities for before, during, and after the meal

ASK GUESTS TO INTERVIEW EACH OTHER. One way to dig up information is to conduct interviews. Since Thanksgiving can be a hectic time, try assigning interviews to go on throughout the day.

As guests arrive, give them a tape recorder or paper and pencils and assign them someone to interview. You might also offer a list of sample questions. Team up a niece with her uncle whom she doesn't see very often, a grandson with his grandfather, and so on. Let the children help with the interviews. You may be delighted with what the children will contribute through their natural curiosity.

Schedule the interviews so that everyone has a chance to visit throughout the day. Pairs can go off to a quiet spot in the house or yard and talk for half an hour. You may want to ask people to share some of the stories around the dinner table, which will surely inspire the telling of more stories.

Collect the results of the interviews, type them up, and send copies to everyone who participated. You might even videotape the interviews and give copies to family members for Christmas.

CREATE SURPRISE QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS DURING DINNER. This is a fun way to glean a little family history from everyone present. Write questions on slips of paper and tape them under the edge of the table at each place setting. Adults and children alike can take turns responding to the question or topic. Some ideas for questions: Tell us about your first kiss or favorite childhood pet; tell when you knew what

you wanted to do with your life and how you made it (or plan to make it) happen; talk about your most embarrassing moment; reveal who is (or was) the most influential person in your life and why. Not only will these tales add to your store of family history, but they may offer life lessons for the others at the table.

USE PHOTOGRAPHS TO PRIME THE MEMORY PUMP. Dig out the photo albums, create a display of old photos, or ask each guest to bring a favorite family photograph. One Ohio woman, planning a surprise birthday celebration for her 70-year-old mother, asked everyone to bring or send an old photo. She recalls the day of the celebration: "The photos were a big hit. They were passed around, and everyone was remembering and laughing. This started a lot of storytelling."

Making activities intergenerational

BRING THE ELDERLY TOGETHER. Have you ever noticed that when two old friends of the same generation get together, the stories flow? What one doesn't think of, the other one will. Invite two or more elderly folks around the same age who have a history together and make sure you have plenty of film and cassette tapes.

INVOLVE THE YOUNGSTERS. Although our elderly relatives can give us a peek into the mysterious past, we shouldn't discount a child's contributions to the family history. Encourage stories from people of all ages. Your interest will make every person feel valued, and family bonds will be strengthened as members gain a deeper understanding of one another.

KEEP THE MEMORIES COMING. Often one memory will trigger another and another, but it helps to ask open-ended questions. For example, ask the interviewee: What happened next? How did you feel when that happened? Can you describe the person or the circumstances? Ask about the time of year, the weather, and other details. Sometimes being

urged to remember details will call up other memories of the event or circumstance.

Ask questions that require some reflection. For example: Did you ever regret not finishing school or not following that dream? How was your life made better because you made that decision?

Not all of our memories are pleasant, and, in the course of an interview, some sad memories may surface. Let the person talk about it if he wants to. If someone starts to get upset or become silent, ask if she wants to talk more about it or if she'd rather change the subject.

Saving and sharing the stories

DOCUMENT THE STORIES. Don't let all this good information you've collected go to waste. Either record it on tape or write it down while it's fresh in your mind. Use a transcribing machine to transcribe the tapes or type up the handwritten notes, organizing the material chronologically.

A low-tech way to handle family history data is to put it in a loose-leaf binder so it can be rearranged in the binder as new information comes in. You can copy the pages and share them with others as you get the information. Or you might publish a monthly family history newsletter. For those with computer access, information is easily stored, organized, and shared. If a family member has the means, you might even develop a Web page, exchanging information with family members from all over.

This year, consider using your time together on Thanksgiving to celebrate your family history. Glean something from every member of the family and preserve it for generations to come.

Patricia L. Fry has been writing for publication for 30 years. She has contributed articles to many magazines and is the author of 16 books.

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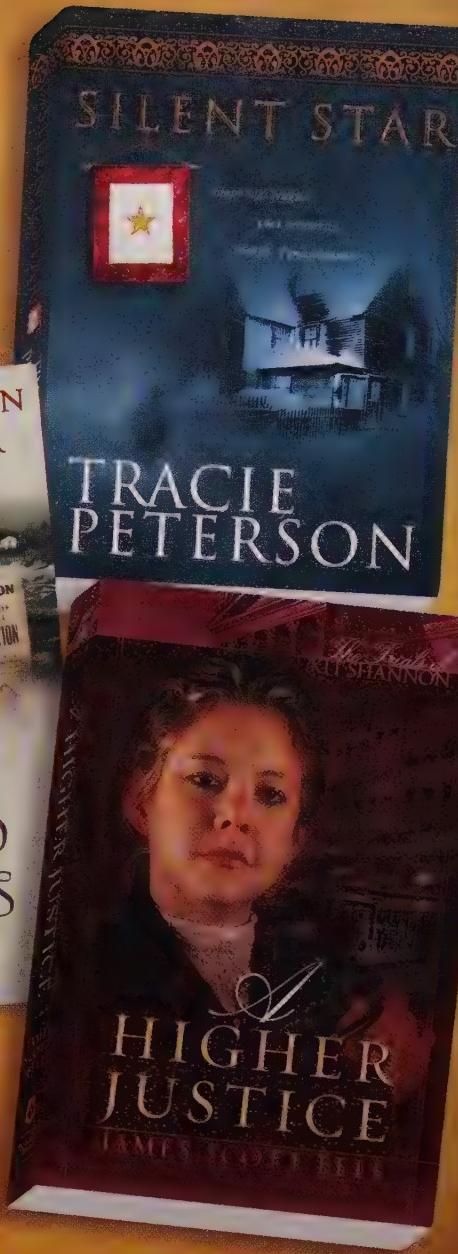
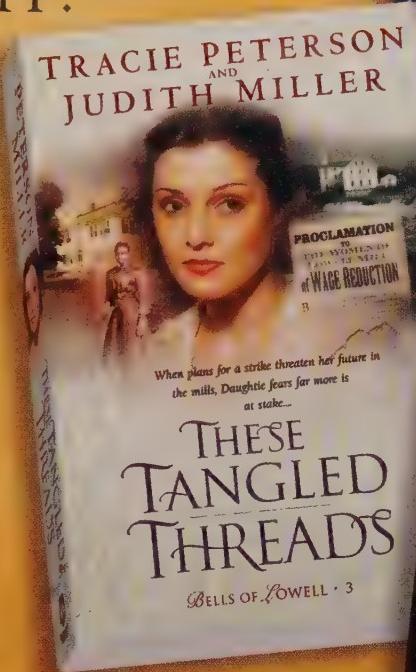
In the quiet town of Haven, Pennsylvania, World War II has cast a blanket of worry over everyone. Young Andy Gilbert feels particularly alone at Christmas, but he soon finds an unexpected comfort. An elderly neighbor's glimmer of wisdom helps Andy and the town recover the hope and joy of the season!

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Helping Women Help Themselves

by Faith L. Fretheim and Doris Strieter

WOMEN OF THE ELCA IS AGAIN RECEIVING APPLICATIONS TO ITS 2004 GRANTS AND SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS. These programs provide an opportunity for women to support and encourage other women as they work to improve themselves, their families, and their communities.

Each year grants are awarded to projects that offer a chance for a more abundant life for the recipients or those whom they serve. Priority is given to organizations and ministries that view people and communities as assets rather than objects of need and that do one or more of the following: develop the capabilities of women; overcome barriers to community and family empowerment; encourage strong and healthy communities; advocate for justice.

Scholarships are awarded (1) to laywomen, and (2) to women seeking ordination in an ELCA congregation.

An applicant for a laywoman's scholarship must be a U.S. citizen, a member of an ELCA congregation, and at least 21 years old, and taking at least a two-year break between high school and the return to an educational institution. The Arne Administrative Scholarship provides assistance to laywomen who have at least a bachelor's degree

and are returning to school with the hope of reaching the top of their field as an administrator. An applicant for this scholarship must be a U.S. citizen and a member of an ELCA congregation.

The Chilstrom Scholarship provides assistance to women who are second-career students entering their final year at an ELCA seminary. Applicants must be U.S. citizens and must be planning to be ordained as ELCA pastors.

To Apply for a Grant or Scholarship

The complete criteria and application forms for grants and scholarships are available from the Women of the ELCA Web site (www.elca.org/wo/), by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2480, or by writing Women of the ELCA Grants Program (or Scholarship Program), 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189.

Completed applications for both must be received on or before February 15, 2004. Grant recipients will be selected in May, and funding is awarded in June. Scholarship applicants will be notified of award status in late April.

If You Would Like to Help

The various scholarship funds were begun by women in predecessor

organizations of the ELCA who saw the value of continuing education, at no matter what age, and also saw the value of assisting their Lutheran sisters. Similarly, the grants program is supported by contributions from women across the country. Each year the requests for assistance increase.

Your help is essential to ensure that Women of the ELCA can continue to support programs and ministries that empower women and children. To contribute to the grants fund, make checks payable to Women of the ELCA Grants Program No. 528 at the address listed above.

Scholarship donations are also received at the above address. Please make checks payable to Women of the ELCA, and indicate "Scholarship Program" on the memo line. For a brochure describing the scholarship funds, call 800-638-3522, ext. 2480.

To all who have contributed to the grants program, donated to an existing scholarship fund, or helped to start a new fund, the recipients send a hearty thank-you!

Faith L. Fretheim and Doris Strieter are associates for programs with Women of the ELCA.



GRACE NOTES

Hello, Neighbor!

by Mary Ellen Kiesner

I HAD PICKED UP A PACK OF DEVOTIONAL CARDS AT A LOCAL CHRISTIAN BOOKSTORE. ONE PARTICULAR CARD CAUGHT MY EYE: "IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE ARE MANY MANSIONS. I HOPE THAT WE ARE NEIGHBORS SOMEDAY!"

The words of 1 Thessalonians 4:1 came to me: "Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more."

Could it be that the work we do here will not be fully completed until we celebrate as neighbors in heaven? Is that why God calls us to do more and more? As I thought of all the wonderful programs that Women of the ELCA participants have put into place, I wondered, "Will the reach of these ministries extend into eternity?"

I realized that by staying connected to God through participation in Bible study and theological retreats such as Paths to Wholeness, women are enabled to see beyond the *now* and look to the *future*, an eternal future. We see this again and again in grassroots ministries that began when women heard God's call in the needs of a neighbor and sought to make a difference.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:9 we read, "Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to *love one another*." Why do we find it difficult to do what God so clearly commands—to love one another? Is it because we are so aware of our own imperfections? Could it be that to bring about change in the world we might be chal-

lenged to examine and change our own lives? The Women of the ELCA antiracism program Today's Dream, Tomorrow's Reality leads me to pray that we will see a life-changing reality some day.

We need only look into our global backyard to see poverty, hunger, and disease in the faces of others in a hurting world. The Women of the ELCA program Women Building Global Community brings forth advocates who tell their stories in hopes that they will make an eternal difference in God's hurting creation around the world.

As I consider the list of global problems—hunger, disease, racism, poverty, injustice—our world doesn't sound much like heaven to me. But through the grace of being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, we are *hope-filled* eternal creatures. Occasionally we glimpse what eternity might look like: when we celebrate ministries that can make a difference in the life of even one person; when we create communities that work hard to include everyone; when we see hands reaching out to others regardless of differences and ending in an embrace of hearts. When we do these things, we see hope in the faces of those being fed, educated, healed, and given a chance for a meaningful life.

Thank you for your faithful ministries that have the vision to see into eternity. "In my Father's house are many mansions. I hope that we are neighbors someday!"

Mary Ellen Kiesner is churchwide president of Women of the ELCA.

Crossing Over

by Catherine Malotky

WE KNOW HE'S DYING, GOD. WHAT WE DON'T KNOW IS WHEN.

But my brother-in-law is too young. He's too much fun. He is husband, son, uncle, and friend. This weekend, he could still ride his bike, eat a wonderful dinner, and hold his wife. How long will it be before he cannot? How fast will the cancer steal away the things we think are his life?

Because he is dying, I'm thinking about heaven. When I was a little girl, heaven was a place full of swing sets and apple trees. Dogs of every color and size romped around, and they all loved me. It was a place of wonder and hope and joy.

I remember the vision I had at my grandfather's graveside. By then I was an adult, and I had buried a daughter years before. She was eight weeks old. He was 98. There were no swing sets but rather a long line of saints singing and winding their way through the streets of the New Jerusalem. My little one, now a veteran in heaven, took Grandpa's hand and welcomed him into the line. He smiled at her and then joined the song, his deep rumble blending with her little soprano. Grandpa walked easily again.

This weekend, when the cancer still let my brother-in-law ride and eat and hold, I told my grandmother, now almost 100 years old, about this vision at my grandpa's grave. The tears spilled down her cheeks. I imagine that she, at such a ripe old age, can see herself joining that line of singing saints. Then again, perhaps she saw instead a ban-

quet table full of saints—her friends, now gone, her parents and siblings—and she was again able to make her famous barbequed ribs and lay them out to the oohs and ahs of those she loves.

Who knows, God, what you have in store for us? Can we trust that your love for us is steadfast, even as we cross over the threshold between this life and the next? And if we trust, can we then live among the gifts you have given so richly?

He is dying, but you, Almighty God, who knew him even in his mother's womb, will not let him go. You, who are beyond time and space, will welcome him into the next life where you have made a place for him, for you are at home there in a world beyond our imagination. You, master healer, will gather into yourself his cancer and his pain, and he will be healed.

And we, dear God, will weep for our loss. But we will also trust the life you give us each day. He will be with us still. Because of your love, he will be in the sounds of the grasses that sway around us and the rain that cleanses the earth and the laughter we share as we tell his story—our story. Thank you, God, for your faithfulness and the gift of this hope. Amen.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as representative for North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

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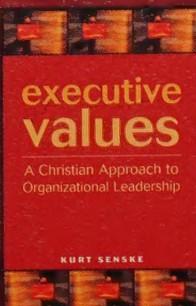
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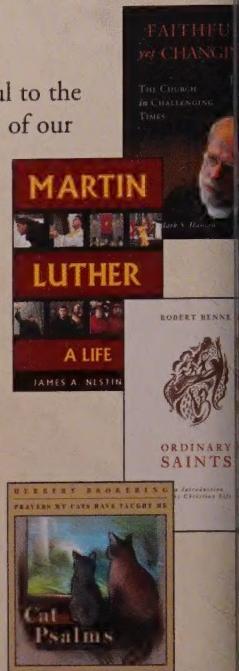
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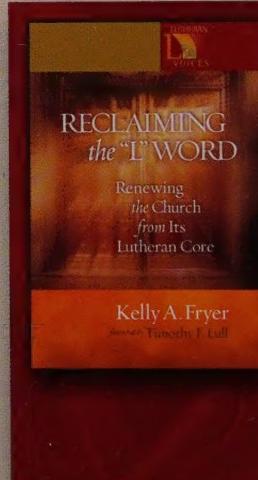
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